

MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS

Short-beaked Bald-rush (Rhynchospora nitens)

Description

Short-beaked Bald-rush is a short, slender, inconspicuous annual sedge, 4 to 20 cm (2-8 in.) tall. Most plants are less than 10 cm tall and are often difficult to detect among similar looking sedges and grasses. From the base, one to several fertile stalks arise from several slender leaves. At intervals along the stalks and at the tips, clusters of dark grey-brown spikelets produce flowers and fruits from late July through September.

Habitat in Massachusetts

Short-beaked Bald-rush is found on wet, sandy to slightly peaty, exposed shores and bottoms of freshwater coastal plain ponds. This species appears only during periods of drought when water levels are very low while the seeds lie dormant during the intervening periods of higher water levels. The fluctuating water levels typical of this habitat allow successful reproduction to take place only once in 4 to 7 years. Associated species include Ericaulon septangulare (Pipewort), Gratiola aurea (Golden Hedge-hysop), Juncus pelocarpus (Pondshore Rush), Eleocharis spp. (Spike-rushes), (R. scirpoides) (Long-beaked Bald-rush), and Fimbristylis autumnalis (Autumn Fimbry).

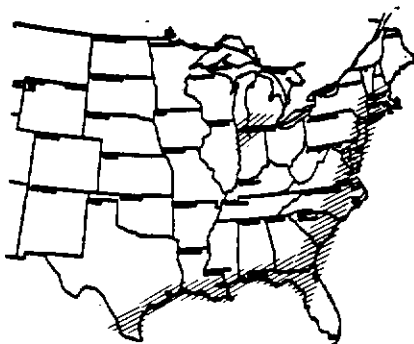


Similar Species in Massachusetts

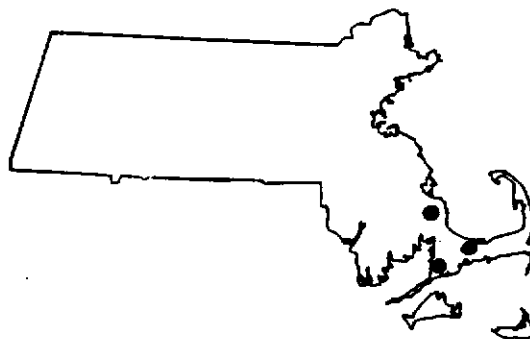
Long-beaked Bald-rush (R. scirpoides) is very similar to the Short-beaked Bald-rush, but grows much taller, has more strongly tapered spikelets which are chestnut-

An Illustrated Flora of the
U.S. and Canada. Vol. I. p. 347.
Britton and Brown. 1970.

(Continued overleaf)



Distribution



● Verified since 1978
○ Reported prior to 1978

Distribution in Massachusetts by Town

brown in color, and has a long beak (pointed end) on the seed (called the achene in sedges) as opposed to the very short beak in R. nitens. Autumn or Slender Fimbry (Fimbristylis autumnalis, which usually grows with both Bald-rushes and is similar in appearance to the Long-beaked Bald-rush, is more slender and has narrower spikelets whose scales have a green midrib.

Range

Short-beaked Bald-rush ranges from southeastern Massachusetts south along the Atlantic Coastal Plain to central Florida and eastern Texas. It occurs as a very rare disjunct species in northwestern Indiana and southwestern Michigan.

Population Status

Short-beaked Bald-rush is listed as "Threatened" by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. Since 1978, it has been verified at nine sites in the state. Historically (prior to 1978), there were three records of the Short-beaked Bald Rush in the state indicating that this plant may never have been common in Massachusetts. Chances of discovering other sites are remote due to the lack of suitable habitat. The condition and number of plants within a population vary enormously at each site and none of the state's populations number more than a few hundred plants. Threats to this species include excessive recreational use of ponds and runoff contamination from faulty septic systems. The limited capabilities of this species to disperse naturally may also contribute this plant's rarity in the state.